

Angels Among Us

'Dirty angels' help to build homes, community

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — On the morning of Dec. 4, Bob Peterson and Jim Britt were wrestling with a large concrete slab for the front walk at 58 Hoeltzer St.

"It's not that hard to move, once we get the path all leveled," commented Peterson, a parishioner at St. Joseph's Parish, Penfield. "What we need is sand."

Lacking sand, he paused and quipped, "Dirty angels will make do with dirt."

Down the street at 40 Hoeltzer St., George Taylor and Joe Kelly were discussing their strategy for painting the bedroom woodwork.

"When we paint the woodwork, we're not going to touch this edge," explained Kelly, a parishioner at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Irondequoit, pointing to the molding around a closet door.

Just before the work had begun, Taylor, a parishioner at St. Theodore Church, Gates, remarked, "It's a nice feeling to get through and say 'I did this,' and 'I did that.'"

What Peterson, Britt, Kelly and Taylor "did" — along with hundreds of other volunteers — was to help complete two Habitat for Humanity houses. The two houses were dedicated along with three others on Hoeltzer Street in inner-city Rochester Dec. 13.

Those five houses finished this year join three others completed on the street in 1996 under the supervision of Flower City Habitat for Humanity. In fact, St. Joseph's Parish and St. Louis Parish, Pittsford, each sponsored a house last year.

The houses on which the quartet were working this month were ecumenical efforts. St. Theodore's and Third Presbyterian Church of Rochester sponsored 40 Hoeltzer St., while St. Joseph's worked with six other Penfield churches to build at 58 Hoeltzer St. Britt, for example, was from Faith Lutheran Church.

Work on the houses began in June with the digging of basements. Volunteers and the future homeowners — who are required to put in 500 hours of "sweat equity" on the construction of their homes — did all the construction work, from laying the foundation blocks to shingling the roofs, under the supervision of Habitat supervisors. The owners then pay low-interest mortgages supplied through Habitat.

But the projects involved more than just the actual construction work. In fact, when asked how many people took part in the Habitat effort, Fran Thomey, who helped coordinate volunteers for the St. Joseph's house, initially responded, "Good heavens."

After a moment's thought, she cited the teams who actually worked on the house, then noted, "We had a group of people who sent thank-you notes. We had people who did money raisers."

She estimated that more than 300 worked with the project, but could not be certain.

"There were many, many volunteers in many, many ways," she said.

Similarly, Rich Cringoli, who coordinated St. Theodore's efforts, was at a loss as to how many people helped.

"I don't have a clue as to how many people worked on everything," Cringoli said, estimating the number could easily have been 350 to 400.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Bob Peterson, a parishioner of St. Joseph's, Penfield, levels the front yard of a new Habitat for Humanity home at 58 Hoeltzer St., Rochester, Dec. 4, one of five new homes being built. Below, two Habitat homes on Hoeltzer Street can be seen from the second floor of one of the new homes.

"Every organization (in the parish) participated in fundraising," he said. "We had all sorts of volunteers in the background that hardly anybody knew about."

Whether having worked directly on the houses — or behind the scenes — volunteers noted that one of the effects was a sense of community.

"I think we saw the benefit, the opportunity it offered to the individuals participating in it," observed Bob Burns, a coordinator of the Penfield house. "We got to know and work with people in the community."

"You find that there's a lot of really good people out there," he added.

"I met a lot of people at church I didn't even know," acknowledged Terry Hayes, who helped coordinate construction volunteers for St. Theodore's.

"It's probably one of the best projects they've ever done at that church," she added.

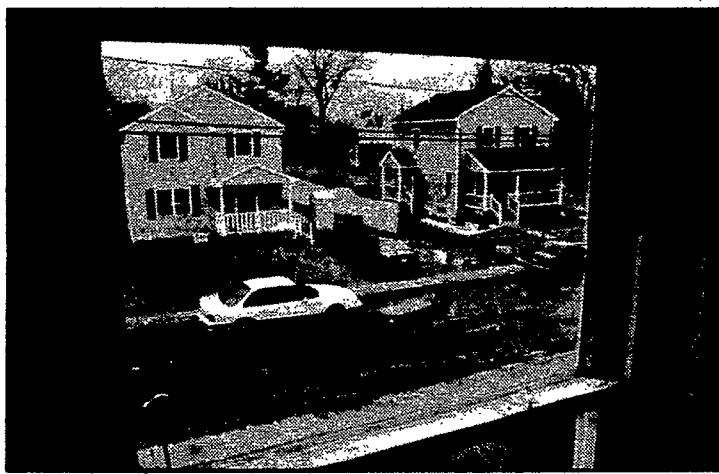
Meanwhile, the coordinating committee at St. Theodore's has become something like a small Christian community, Cringoli reported. The group plans to stay together to undertake parish projects.

"One of the things I suggested is that since we understand as a team, outreach, that we have outreach within our own community," he said.

But Habitat projects provide more than just community builders for the churches involved, observed Arthur Woodward, executive director of Flower City Habitat.

"What it does is (volunteers) feel part of the effort, one, to build a home for a family, but also part of a larger effort to revitalize a neighborhood."

He noted that when Habitat decided two years ago to work on Hoeltzer Street, the street was filled with houses abandoned or in disrepair, and with at least one



taking pride in the street." Moreover, Habitat efforts help to give people homes of their own, Peterson said.

"They get a sense of pride and ownership," he said. "It makes a difference."

Cringoli noted that involvement in the project has given him a new appreciation of what faith means.

"I think it's one thing to say 'I do this,' and 'I do that,' 'I support this,'" Cringoli said. "It's another thing to go out and spend time and energy."

"That's what Christianity is all about," he added. "It's not a spectator sport. Next time I'm not going to just write a check. I'm going to do something."

house serving as a center of drug activity. But now the climate on the street has changed, thanks to the houses.

"It's really brought a sense of hope to that neighborhood," Woodward said.

He noted, for example, that he had gone to visit the street a few weeks ago, and one of the neighbors approached him. She told him that she had seen kids throwing stones at one of the houses under construction, and had called the police to stop the youths — something neighbors would not have done in the past.

"That was a great example," Woodward said. "The neighbors taking care the street,

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